8: Qubain S-5 (1952-53) MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

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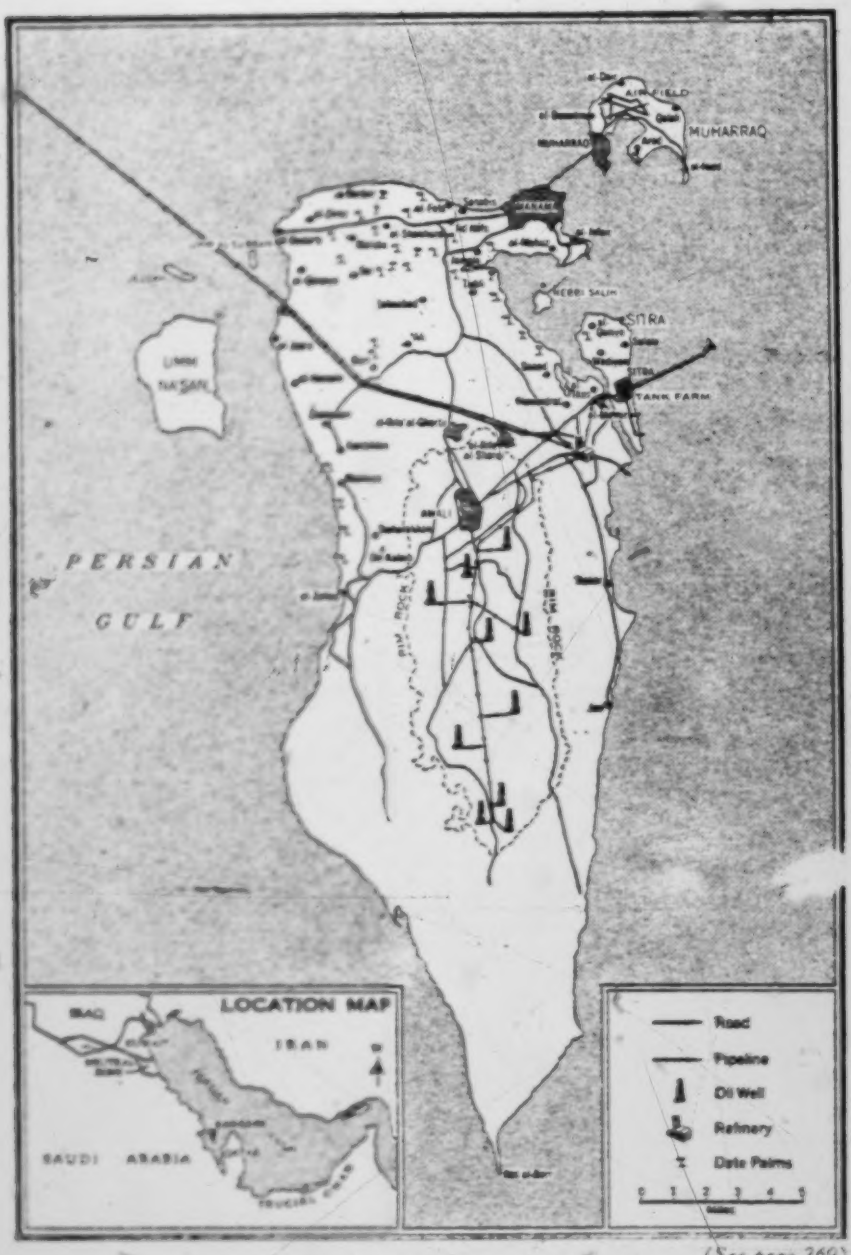

(See page 269)

The Shaykhdom of Bahrain

facing p. 239

8:Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

SOCIAL CLASSES AND TENSIONS IN BAHRAIN

Fahim I. Qubain

(See map, facing p. 239.)

ONE OF THE more interesting principalities in the Persian Gulf is the tiny island shaykhdom of Bahrain. Its geographical location, its maritime commerce, and its ancient pearl industry have all combined to create a multi-group society of its small population of about 110,000. On the whole, the country is well and efficiently governed, the various groups in the population have by generations of experience learned to tolerate each other, and crime in the Western sense of the word is almost nonexistent. At the same time, latent tensions exist that can be exploited if the proper circumstances arise. For instance, riots broke out between the Sunnis and the Shi'is during Muharram in September 1953. It took the use of the whole police force and the imposition of a curfew to bring peace back to the country.[1] In July of the following year, when some Shi'is were convicted for being involved in a fight with Sunnis, the whole Shi'i sect staged a demonstration, conducted an attack on a police post during which four Shi'is were killed, and finally all Shi'i workers went on strike.[2] Six months later, in December 1954, another general strike took place in support of demands made to the government for certain reforms which had already been promised by the ruler.[3] We propose, in this article, to examine the nature of these tensions and to evaluate their seriousness for the future.

POPULATION BREAKDOWN AND DISTRIBUTION

Until 1941 only estimates existed regarding the population of the Bahrain cluster of islands. In that year, the government, primarily for food control purposes, conducted the first census in the history of the islands; in 1950 a second census was taken. At that time the population was 109,650.[4] (See Tables I, II, and III.)

[1] Government of Bahrain, *Official Gazette*, September 24, 1953, p. 3.
[2] *Times* (London), July 13, 1954, p. 7.
[3] *Ibid.*, December 6, 1954, p. 7.
[4] Government of Bahrain, *Census 1950* (Bahrain, 1950).

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[See p. 270, cat. 116 -- Analyst]

8:Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

162

Table I. DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION BY NATIONALITIES IN BAHRAIN

Nationalities	Census 1941 *Total*	Census 1950 *Sub-Total*	Census 1950 *Total*
Bahrain Subjects	74,040		91,179
Persians	7,547		6,934
Indians, Anglo-Indians, Pakistanis, Goanese	1,424		3,043
Saudi Arabs		2,526	
Omanis and Muscatis		2,466	
Qataris		458	
Kuwaitis		149	
Yemenis		105	
Iraqis		224	
Palestinians		28	
Syrians and Lebanese		52	
Egyptians		30	
Others		268	
			6,286
Westerners			
British		1,840	
Americans	6,959	290	
Others		78	
			2,208
Grand Total	89,970		109,650
Bahrain Subjects	74,040		91,179
Foreigners	15,930		18,471

Source: *Census 1950*, p. 13.

Table II. DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION BY TOWNS AND VILLAGES

Town	*1941*	*1950*	*% of Increase*	*% of Population*
Manamah	27,836	39,648	43.0	61.5
Muharraq and Hedd	21,439	25,577	19.0	
Other towns and villages	39,164	40,579	3.5	38.5
Ships at anchor and Awali	1,531	3,846		
Total	89,970	109,650	22.0	100.0

Source: *Census 1950*, p. 12.

Table III. DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION BY RELIGION

Religion	*1941*	*% of Population*	*1950*	*% of Population*
Muslims	83,298			
Shi'i	46,354	93.0	105,401[a]	96.0
Sunni	41,944			
Christians			2,932	
Jews			293	
Hindus	1,672	2.0	975	4.0
Others			49	

a. Sects among Muslims were not recorded because of local objections.
Source: *Census 1950*, p. 14.

8:Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

Over 61 percent of this population lives in the three towns of Manamah, Muharraq, and Hedd;[5] the rest, 38.5 percent, is scattered about in 90 villages and hamlets concentrated mostly in the northern and northeastern tip of the largest island. In the 9-year period between the two censuses the population had increased 22 percent, mainly in the three towns mentioned. The village population remained almost stationary (actually an absolute increase of 3.5 percent and a relative decrease of 5.5 percent). The concentration of increase in the towns can be explained by the better sanitary conditions existing there and the influx of foreigners. Evidently there was little local migration during this period from village to town, although in some cases it was found that villages had been deserted or greatly reduced in size.[6] It is interesting to note that the only population movement took place in some of the Arab Sunni villages.[7]

Tables I and III are in a certain sense misleading, for they give a false picture of homogeneity in the population (84 percent Bahrain subjects, 96 percent Muslims) that does not exist. Society in Bahrain is divided into several groupings, in most cases distinct and recognizable. Association with one group in many instances implies a certain occupational specialization, but the main forces that have determined social division are religion, tribal loyalties, and nationality.

THE SHI'IS AND THE SUNNIS

The Muslim Arab population of Bahrain is divided into Shi'is and Sunnis, who in almost all cases never live in the same village. The Shi'is live in their own tightly-knit communities and do not intermix with the rest of the population to any considerable degree. Fighting — especially in the larger towns, when the two communities do come into contact — frequently breaks out between the two groups, necessitating the intervention of the police and even the British navy.[8] A recent index of the feeling between the two groups is the fact that for the last several years there has been no municipal council for the capital city, Manamah, for the simple reason that no agreement could be reached on the number of seats to be allotted each of the two Muslim groups.

Aside from the small minority of Persians, the Shi'is are all Baharnah. There is no agreement as to the ethnic origin of these people; however, they now speak Arabic and are regarded as Arabs. They are the oldest group among the present inhabitants of the shaykhdom and have been subjected through the centuries to successive conquests, so that although at present they equal or exceed the Sunnis in number — as the 1941 census

[5] See Table II.
[6] *Census 1950*, p. 6.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[8] Abbas Faroughy, *The Bahrein Islands* (New York, 1951), p. 99.

8:Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

indicates — they constitute the poorer and lower classes of society and manifest all the markings of a minority group. Until recently they lived hardly above the servile state, their occupational specialization being exclusively the cultivation of the soil and other menial labor. The arrival of the British, which has assured them some security in person and a guarantee of minimum rights, and the development of the oil industry, which has opened possibilities of alternative employment, have had the effect of gradually raising these people from their status as second-class citizens.

The Sunnis act as the majority group. This has been especially true since a Sunni tribe established its political dominance over the islands in the 18th century. The Sunnis present a common front toward other groups; among themselves, however, they are divided into several communities and tribes. The largest Sunni community is the Huwalah. Its members are townsmen living by trade; and as townsmen everywhere, they do not manifest marked feelings of solidarity. They can perhaps be regarded as the nucleus of a future middle class.

The Utab, if not the largest Sunni tribe, is the most influential. This is due to the fact that the Khalifah family, one of its sub-tribes, has ruled the islands without serious interruption for almost 200 years. Every member of the Khalifah family has the title of "shaykh." Along with the privileges and prestige he enjoys as a result of his position, he has certain obligations and restrictions on his conduct and manner of life. For instance, in recent years many Bahrain subjects, especially among the younger city population, have taken to wearing European dress. No member of the ruling family may do so.

The two other Sunni tribes of any importance are the Sadah and the Dawasir, the first because of its alleged sacred origin, the second because of its comparative wealth.*

Unlike the Shi'is, the Sunnis are relatively mobile. They depend for their livelihood on trade, pearling, fishing, and more recently on employment in the oil industry. Boat building also used to be a fairly important industry. It is very seldom that a Sunni is found engaged in agriculture as a life occupation except as a landowner.

As has been shown, among the two main native elements social division and social tensions rest on religious foundations. Religious affiliation determines to a considerable degree the social and economic position of the individual. When mass violence breaks out it has so far been in terms of Shi'is and Sunnis, never in terms of economic groups.

An interesting development in recent years is the stress of the dominant

* Most of the Dawasir returned in anger to the Arabian mainland in the early 1920's, soon after Shaykh Hamad, whom they disliked, assumed control. For the story of their return see Government of Bahrain, *Administrative Report for the Years 1926-1937* (Bahrain, 1937), pp. 8-9.

8:Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

An interesting development in recent years is the stress of the dominant
186 group, the Sunnis, on the unity and brotherhood of all Muslims and Arabs.
659 In 1950, when the second census was made, it was planned to count the two groups separately. This proposal, however, was construed as a British scheme to divide the Muslims and set them against each other. Strong objections were made by both groups, but primarily by the Sunnis, to the government and consequently this aspect of the census was abandoned. No such objections were raised during the census only nine years earlier.

186 Two factors can perhaps account for this rather nascent stress on unity: emerging nationalism and new economic forces. The conception of nationality is a Western contribution and a new arrival in the Persian Gulf. In Bahrain it is still a vague idea and certainly has not replaced to any degree the existing loyalties. It manifests itself in two ways: first, negatively in a desire to expel the foreigner (this has considerable appeal: it is concrete, intellectually easy to grasp, can be used as a rallying cry, and above all does not conflict with established social patterns); and second, positively, in a confused ideal of a pan-Arab, pan-Islamic union. No clear distinction is drawn between the two last concepts and the terms are used interchangeably. It must be admitted, however, that the pan-Arab aspect of the ideal predominates. This new spirit of nationalism has had the effect of creating a greater emphasis on unity among the native population. Furthermore, through this intellectual device the two groups can now present a common front against foreigners to protect their rights and interests, whether real or imaginary.

565 The new economic force for unity is the oil industry. On the surface
178 things seem as they have always been. In fact a change, subtle and hard
464 to detect, has taken place. The oil industry, as indicated previously, has
186 opened the doors of employment to the Shi'is. This has resulted in bettering slightly their economic condition and consequently their relative status vis-à-vis other groups. Furthermore, such employment has meant that they are no longer restricted to agriculture. They can now sell their labor and skills as everyone else in a wider and more favorable market. On the job at the company installations, Shi'i and Sunni are brought together as laborers or artisans and placed on the same footing. For the first time in their history it has become possible for individuals from both groups to collaborate in certain areas of action, not as Shi'is or Sunnis, but as members of an economic group.

THE JEWS

162 A third native religious group is the small Jewish minority comprising
563 about 250 persons. Its members are well known for their industry, their
463 higher standard of living, their higher rate of education, and their amenability to Western influences. They are exclusively engaged in trade and money changing.

8:Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

The Jews have lived in the country in comparative peace and security for centuries. Their position was clear and definite. As non-Muslims they were outside the pale of the law and could not participate fully in the life of the community; but as "People of the Book" they were a *dhimma*, a protected community. In civil matters they enjoyed the same legal rights as all other Bahrain subjects. Here again social lines of demarcation were drawn on a religious basis.

With the appearance of the Palestine problem the position of this small minority became progressively more precarious. Today the Jews are socially ostracized and economically boycotted, and there have been instances where physical violence has been employed against them. The local press of Bahrain is replete with references to Bahraini Jews, the Jews in general, and to Israel. Such references include, among other things, threats to publish the names of those who associate with Jews in Bahrain or buy from them, references to the United Nations as a Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world, and editorial protests to the government against allowing allegedly Israeli airlines to land in Bahrain, or against radio-communications with Israel.[10]

The government of Bahrain has no official policy of enmity toward Israel as have the other Arab states. Commercial traffic is not prohibited with Israel or with the Jews as a whole, but in practice it is virtually so. This boycott is due in part to social pressure and in part to the fact that a large part of the goods imported into Bahrain is re-exported to Saudi Arabia, a country which has strict regulations against traffic with Jews.

Owing to their present position, the Jews are the only native community whose interests and aspirations are at complete variance with those of the native population. It is a matter of public knowledge that many of them have either left or are in the process of leaving the country to start a new life in Israel, the United States, or Europe.

THE PERSIANS AND THE INDIANS

The two major foreign elements in the country are the Persians and the Indians.[11] Their social status and relations with the native population are determined primarily by psychological, political, and economic factors rather than by religion or tribal loyalties.

The Persians are the largest foreign group, but it should be noted that they are foreigners in the legal and political sense only, for they are as much a part of the scene as the legal citizens of the country. Iran has had a long and checkered association with the islands going back to pre-Islamic times. At one period, the islands were directly controlled by it, and as late

[10] See any number of *al-Qafilah*, a weekly newspaper, or *Sawt al-Bahrain*, a monthly magazine. Both are published in Bahrain in Arabic.

[11] As used in this paper, the term "Indians" includes Indians, Pakistanis, Anglo-Indians, and Goanese.

8:Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

as the 19th century even the British recognized that Iran had some rights in Bahrain. The Iranian government has never relinquished its claims to the islands, a fact which has had a direct bearing on the position of the Persian community.

Under these favorable circumstances, Persians have been able until recently to move in and out of Bahrain without hindrance or restriction. Over the centuries a prosperous community developed, made up mostly of merchants, so that today some of the wealthiest inhabitants of Manamah are Persians. Generally speaking, this community is more enterprising, better educated, and has a higher standard of living than the local inhabitants of the land. But although the Persians grew prosperous and acquired property in houses and some land, their hearts were never in Bahrain — they were across the Gulf in the mother country. Bahrain is regarded by the Persians as an outpost for commercial activity but not for permanent settlement.

The Persians are resented by both the Arab inhabitants and the British. They are resented by the Arabs because they constitute a foreign community which is somewhat aloof from the rest of the population; in part, also, because of envy of their general prosperity and because they are regarded as interlopers who are taking the wealth of the country away. Two other serious objections to them are that they are Shi'is by religion and tend to look toward Iran rather than the Arab world for political association.

As for the British, they resent them for numerous reasons. In almost every way they constitute a threat, minor and insignificant though it may be, to the consolidation of their position in the shaykhdom. This is especially true since Bahrain has become the chief base for British naval, air, and political activity in the Persian Gulf. Specifically, the British resent the Persian community because it has always opposed what it regards as the "Indianization" policies of the British in Bahrain. It has played the double role of an opposition party and a fifth column. The recent difficulties of the British government and the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in Iran brought the problem of Anglo-Iranian relations to a sharp focus. The situation has constituted a threat to British prestige in the Gulf. In Bahrain Mosaddaq was regarded as a liberator — in the early part of 1953 pictures of him could be seen in many shops in Manamah.

The policies of the government of Bahrain have been detrimental to the position of the Persian community. In 1927 visas for entry to Bahrain became required of Persian subjects. In December of the same year a land registry office was established and a decree passed requiring that all land be registered; it also stipulated that only Bahrain subjects could own real property. With the passage of the decree a good many Persians had only two alternatives: either to acquire Bahrain citizenship, which many of them

8:Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

did, or sell out and return to the mother country. Those who remained are engaged either in trade or employed by the oil company or some other business establishment. In the last few years the government has been refusing to grant citizenship to Persian residents even though they may legally qualify.[12]

The Indians, the second largest foreign community, are in a certain sense in a position similar to that of the Persians. Bahrain, like other principalities in the Persian Gulf, has had a long association with the subcontinent through trade. In 1913, when the Bahrain Order-in-Council was passed, the country became administratively subject to the jurisdiction of the Governor-General of India.

The Indians constitute a prosperous and fairly well educated community. Some are engaged in trade on a big scale or as petty merchants. The rest — and they are the majority — are employed either by the government, the oil company, the British military and civil establishment, or other foreign business concerns in the country. They work mostly as clerks, foremen, cooks, waiters, and domestic servants.

Various explanations have been made as to why Indians are employed in such large numbers in preference to local Bahrainis or persons from other nationalities. In the first place, Bahrain does not have enough young men with a minimum of education and clerical or industrial training to fill these positions. Secondly, in view of British policy to tie Bahrain to India, it was only natural to look to it for the necessary labor supply. Furthermore, India could supply labor well trained by the British and used to their ways. Finally, Indian labor could be obtained at a lower rate than equally skilled labor from other countries.

The status of Indians is a rather peculiar one, for they live in a social zone all by themselves. They are resented by the native population and accepted only as subordinates by Westerners, with whom they would like to associate and with whom they would like to be classified. This is true especially of the clerical and professional group among them.

The causes of Bahraini resentment against them are psychological and economic in nature. In the first place, they constitute a community which is definitely foreign and makes a point of it, and in some respects looks down on the local population. This is especially the case among the white-collar workers.

Secondly, on the whole, the Indian community wields power far beyond its number. The people in Bahrain see Indians in government and business establishments and develop the feeling that they are being governed by them along with the British.

In the third place, clerical positions occupied by Indians and other for-

[12] Cf. Lorimer, op. cit., p. 6.

8·Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

563 In the third place, clerical positions occupied by Indians and other
578 foreigners are highly coveted by the high-school graduates of Bahrain. This
554 must be understood within the context of traditional Arab respect for the scribe and the great power wielded until recent times by government employees: clerking represents a social position as well as a source of livelihood.

641 Finally, Indians are given privileges denied to Bahrainis. They are al-
273 lowed, for instance, a monthly allotment of alcoholic beverages and certain
563 public places are open to them and to Westerners only. The problem of
578 alcohol is a delicate one in Bahrain. In accordance with Muslim law it is prohibited to all Muslims. Foreigners and non-Muslims, however, can obtain a monthly allotment at specified prices through a permit from the British Residency. The only two groups that can benefit from such an arrangement are the Westerners and the Indians, since most other foreigners are Muslims.

563 An example of the resentment felt against the Indian clerks may be
578 seen in the following letter to the newspaper *al-Qafilah* from an indignant
191 Bahraini criticizing the Post Office Department:

> I came to the post office window with a large number of greeting cards which I wanted to send to friends outside Bahrain. I inquired from the clerk whether there were any special rates? Snatching the cards from my hands, he gave me an answer in a strange language, the only part of which I understood was "three annas and a half."
>
> It is strange that this department continues to employ clerks who do not understand the language of the country. In this connection, I remember that a short time ago I sent my manservant with a piece of paper on which I had written in Arabic the quantity of stamps I wanted of each denomination. Shortly afterwards he came back very angry. He told me that the clerk threw him out of the building and ordered him to "tell [your master] to write in Indian, Persian, or English. . . . We are not Arabs." [13]

609 A factor which also has considerable effect on the attitude of the native toward foreigners is the development of the oil industry in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In Saudi Arabia the political climate has been such that the native is truly master of his house. The moment the foreigner, and particularly the Westerner, steps on Saudi Arabian soil, government officials and civilians alike do not hesitate to remind him in a thousand ways that he is in an independent country, that he is only a temporary guest, and that his sojourn in the country depends on good behavior. The Arabian American Oil Company, as part of its public relations policy, cooperates with the government fully in this respect and it is a well-known fact that a number of its American employees have been sent home for minor infractions of the local law or for being in some way rude to the native inhabitants.

Bahrain is only a few miles away from Saudi Arabia. Stories of how

[13] *al-Qafilah*, January 2, 1953.

8:Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

609 foreigners are "kept in their place" there circulate by word of mouth — a method of communication highly developed in the Middle East — and exaggerated several times in the process. One of the central themes of the local Bahrain press is a comparison between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in this respect. As is to be expected, this is causing a feeling of frustration among the natives and creating an atmosphere of restiveness and increasing antagonism toward foreigners.

In Kuwait a rather ambitious development program has been under way for several years, made possible by increasing oil royalties. There is an atmosphere of feverish activity, psychologically exaggerated because of its concentration in a small area. By contrast, life in Bahrain is slow and development sober but limited, in view of the comparatively small oil revenues. This causes some jealousy which finds an emotional outlet in an increasing suspicion of foreigners and increasing demands on the major companies, such as the Bahrain Petroleum Company, to do more for the country than they have been doing so far.

FOREIGN ARAB GROUPS

563 167 463 A rather large number of foreign Arabs live in Bahrain. They can be divided into two main groups which in custom and social mores have little in common. The first group is composed of Arabs from Saudi Arabia, Oman, Muscat, Qatar, and Yemen. These people have always been part of the scene. They come and go as they have always done, with hardly any restriction on their movement. Many of them are related to people in [601] Bahrain by blood or marriage and are looked upon as "cousins," *awlad al-'amm*, a term which carries with it all the emotional overtones of the traditions of tribal life. Some of them are merchants; a large number, especially of those from Oman, Muscat, Qatar, and Yemen, are employed by the oil industry as common laborers, and others work with local industries. Their community life and standard of living do not vary a great deal from that of the local population; in fact they are hardly distinguishable from it.

The second group of foreign Arabs, made up of a small number of Egyptians, Syrians, Lebanese, Iraqis, and Palestinians, is comparatively new to the area. On the whole, their standard of living is probably higher than that of any other group with the exception of the Westerners. Few are engaged in trade; the majority are white-collar workers.

563 875 208 177 Although they are largely new arrivals, they already exert considerable influence on the life of the country. Unlike all other foreigners, they are genuinely welcomed and looked up to by the local population. They are the missionaries of Arab nationalism. Most of the high-school and a good number of the elementary-school teachers in Bahrain come from this group (see Table IV); in this key position, it can be truly said of them that they

8:Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

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are the moulders of the new generation of Bahrainis. It is significant that all these teachers come from countries which have just emerged from British or French control.

TRENDS FOR THE FUTURE

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Social realignment among the Sunnis and the Shi'is must be thought of in terms of the distant future. It is true that secular and technical education, nationalism, and economic forces are all operating to bring these two groups together. As a result they have begun to cooperate with each other in certain areas of common interest as nonreligious groups; nevertheless, the old loyalties and social patterns are still strongly entrenched, as is very graphically illustrated by the religious riots of 1953 and 1954. It is even conceivable that when and if religion loses the depth of meaning it has at present to both groups, it may still remain as the basis of political alignment or power, as is the case in highly literate Lebanon.

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Nationalism has replaced religious tradition as the basis of the relations of the Jews with the major segments of society. The resultant tension is being resolved through emigration, but a few will no doubt remain. All indications are that the political struggle between the Arabs and Israel will leave them little chance of reintegrating themselves on some new basis into society in Bahrain. It is possible, although highly improbable thanks to the presence of the British, that mass violence may be used against them. If this does take place, the problem in all likelihood will assume an international character. Israel, which has established itself as the protector and defender of Jewish minorities, no doubt would use every measure to dramatize the plight of this minority to the world.

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The animosity of the native population toward Persians and Indians does not arise from fundamental issues of a permanent nature. There is, for instance, no parallel feeling toward Iran, India, or Pakistan; on the contrary, warm sympathy prevails for them as combatants against Western domination. Both the causes and the issues are transitory in character, and

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Table IV. FOREIGN TEACHERS IN BAHRAIN

Year	*Egypt*	*Syria*	*Lebanon*	*Palestine*	*Other Arab Countries*	*Other Nationalities*	*Total*
1944/45	12	2	12	—	—	2	28
1945/46	10	—	13	..	1	2	26
1946/47	13	9	12	—	1	2	37
1947/48	11	7	14	—	1	2	35
1948/49	22	6	14	—	1	3	46
1949/50	20	7	14	9	1	3	54
1950/51	9	9	15	10	1	3	47
1951/52	9	7	27	18	2	4	67

Source: Government of Bahrain, Dept. of Education, *Report on the Condition of Education in Bahrain* (Bahrain, 1952), p. 47. (In Arabic.)

8:Qubain S-5 (1952-53)1955 MZ2 Bahrain MZ2

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the course of development in Bahrain leaves no doubt that they will gradually be resolved. Bahrainis are receiving education at an increasing rate and are now gradually replacing these two foreign elements in clerical and intermediate positions. There will come a time when foreign labor is no longer needed. All foreign establishments in Bahrain, in response to local pressure, are now replacing foreign employees with Bahrainis, even if at the cost of some efficiency.

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Once the clerical and professional group becomes expendable, the major source of resentment will have been removed. Even if some Indians remain, the native Bahrainis will be able to compete with them on equal terms. In the case of the Persians, until the political issues primarily between the British and the Iranian governments concerning sovereignty over Bahrain are clarified, their position will stay the same.

What of the Westerners? It is my belief that the crisis is yet to come. Despite considerable talk, especially among the literate segment of the population, about exploitation, imperialism, and privileges, the Westerners' higher social status is accepted. The native population has been used for generations to think of them as a group with a special status over and above its own, and it will take some time before a mental reorientation is completed. In the second place, the native people fully realize that they need them. They may want to hate the foreign doctor but they need his medical skill; they may detest the oil company, but it supplies them with necessary royalties. The time, however, is drawing near when the problem will have to be faced. Negative nationalism and other political forces such as Communism (which at present has little influence in the Gulf) may force the issue prematurely if favorable circumstances arise.